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The Social Organism

We are asking these questions to-day. Men were asking the same questions, though in different language, throughout the sixteenth century. It is a commonplace that modern economic history begins with a series of revolutionary changes in the direction and organization of commerce, in finance, in prices, and in agriculture. To the new economic situation men brought a body of doctrine, law and tradition, hammered out during the preceding three centuries. Since the new forces were bewildering, and often shocking, to conserva-tive consciences, moralists and religious teachers met them at first by a re-affirmation of the tra-ditional doctrines, by which, it seemed, their excesses might be restrained and their abuses corrected. As the changed environment became, not a novelty, but an established fact, these doctrines had to be modified. As the effects of the Reformation developed, different Churches produced characteristic differences of social opinion.

But these were later developments, which only gradually became apparent. The new economic world was not accepted without a struggle. Apart from a few extremists, the fii?r*|feneraSon of reformers were rarely innovators in matters of social theory, and quoted Fathers and church councils, decretals and

canon lawyers, in complete unconsciousness that innovations in doctrine and church government involved any breach with what they had learned to regard as the moral r tradition of Christendom. Hence the sixteenth century sees a collision, not only between different schools of religious thought, but between the changed economic environment and the accepted theory of society. To understand it, one must place oneself at the point from which it started. One must examine, however sum-~ marily, the historical background.